

## **Title**

The processual life of neoliberalisation: Permutations of value systems and normative commitments in a co-operative trust setting

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## **Short bio**

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## **Key words**

Co-operative schools, neoliberalism, school governance, processual sociology

## **Abstract**

Since 2010 the government in England has committed to accelerating the expansion of academies ('state-funded independent schools') through displacing the role of local government as principal manager and overseer of schools. In response increasing numbers of schools are embracing the co-operative trust model to improve economies of scale, facilitate stakeholding and community resilience and resist capture from the monopolising tendencies of some large multi-academy trusts seeking wholesale takeover of certain underperforming schools. Yet there are concerns that co-operative schools do not represent a radical departure from routines of neoliberalism – defined by managerial deference, technocratic efficiency, upward accountability and performativity – despite clear signs that co-operative schools promote themselves as jointly-owned, democratically-controlled enterprises. In this paper I adopt a 'processual view of neoliberalisation' (Peck and Tickell 2002) to complicate the idea that co-operative schools can be judged in binary terms of 'either/or' – neoliberal or democratic, exclusionary or participatory – and instead point to the variegated organisational life of co-operative schools and their messy actualities as they straddle competing and sometimes conflicting sets of interests, motives and demands in their practice of school governance.

## **Routines of neoliberal governance**

Like many countries around the globe – Australia (Savage, Seller and Gorur 2013), Chile (Verger, Bonal and Zancajo 2016), Sweden (Lundahl 2013), the US (Hursh 2006), Spain (Olmedo and Eduardo 2013) and Slovakia (Kaščák and Pupala 2014) – England is committed to a ‘mixed economy’ of education. A mixed economy of education typically consists of both state regulation and deregulation; tight, centralised accountability and devolved management; government-managed bureaucracies and private monopolies; and public ownership and privatisation (Ball and Junemann 2012; Gunter 2015; Ozga 2009; Wilkins 2017). Central to a mixed economy of education therefore are private providers and new intermediary actors and agencies (Rhodes 2007), namely charities, businesses and social enterprises, which supplement the formal authority of government and place limits on the capacity of government to intervene in the running of schools. Yet despite the appearance of a ‘reluctant state’ (Ball 2012, p. 89), schools in England do not experience unconditional freedoms and autonomy to govern themselves. Instead they possess something akin to conditional autonomy as central government uses the political machinations of policy, particularly funding agreements, performance benchmarking, private sponsorship and attrition through inspection and high-stakes testing, to exercise greater control over the internal operations and priorities of schools.

Take academies in England. Academies refer to 'state-funded independent schools' previously maintained by local government. Unlike local government-run schools who operate under the discretionary powers of civil servants and elected councillors, academies and the people who run them acquire powers to take ownership of the land and buildings, set the curriculum and admissions policy, manage budget spending, employ staff directly and source their own suppliers and professional advisers. Some schools voluntarily convert to academy status (known as 'converter academies') while other schools (known as 'sponsored academies') are made eligible for takeover by a sponsor due to having 'serious weaknesses' or requiring 'special measures' under section 44(2) of the Education Act 2005. Sponsored academies are typically stripped of their assets and powers to self-determination and brought under the exclusive authority of a board of trustees who, through the acquisition of a foundation or trust, run the school pursuant with a contract with the Secretary of State. In practice, this means less autonomy for some schools and their strict compliance with standard operational procedures in terms of teaching, learning and assessment (Stewart 2016). This is not to say that converter academies possess significantly more 'freedom' than sponsored academies, albeit their 'negative freedom' (*freedom from* certain forms of external influence, namely local government interference) is greater than their 'positive freedom' (*freedom to* pursue

their own interests) (Fromm 2001). In both cases, schools are compelled to behave as businesses and sustain themselves as 'high-reliability' organisations (Reynolds 2010, p. 18), all of which demand proficiency in auditing, performance management and compliance checking (Wilkins 2016).

The limited positive freedom experienced by many schools is partly due to a 'neurotic government' (Wilkins and Olmedo 2018, p. 7) unable to fully accept the vagaries of its own reform, namely the dispersal of significant instructional, financial and operational powers away from the centre and outward toward schools. Hence governments in favour of decentralised education planning typically pursue forms of 'hard governance', 'things like target-setting, performance management, benchmarks and indicators, data use to foster competition, and so on' (Clarke and Ozga 2012, p. 1). These methods or techniques of government – what might be termed 'routines of neoliberal governance' (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 384) – function to organise schools as navigable spaces of replicable and measurable 'quality', of 'commensurability, equivalence and comparative performance' (Lingard, Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2016, p. 542), so that they are amenable to the scrutiny and statistical mapping of external regulators and funders as well as complementary to market conceptions of 'public accountability', narrowly conceived through the lexicon of contract, corporate, performative and consumer terminology (Ranson 2010). Here

governance broadly refers to the design and perfection of structures and processes under which behaviour management and administrative systems may operate successfully, especially among acentred, polycentric systems of education characterised by self-organisation or 'heterarchy' (Olmedo, Bailey and Ball 2013). The extent to which these structures and processes can be considered thoroughly 'neoliberalised' is problematic however, as will be evidenced later in the paper. The organisational life of schools in England at least are better conceptualised as variegated – contingent, dynamic and contradictory.

### **The processual life of neoliberalisation**

In order to capture such variegation, I adopt a 'processual view of neoliberalization' (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 383) that emphasises the 'variegated character of neoliberalization processes' (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, p. 184). A processual view of neoliberalisation acknowledges the unevenness by which routines of neoliberalism are lived and embodied through the labour of socially situated actors. A key focus of this paper therefore is the different ethical imperatives, political commitments and social responsibilities framing such labour as well as the multiplicity of governmental programs and rationalities that intervene to augment, animate and constrain the conditions in which subjects labour to produce. As Li (2007, p. 13) observes, 'what appears to be rational landscape design or

'management' is the serendipitous outcome of everyday practices that have quite disparate motives'. A focus of this paper is the ways in which school leaders and governors working in a co-operative trust (a charitable company jointly set up schools who elect to run themselves as academies pursuant with a funding agreement with the Secretary of State) engage in grafting together competing and sometimes conflicting sets of interests, motives and demands through their practice of school governance. Here school governance is defined as a field of intervention inhabited by various stakeholders, be they community members, parents, teachers, staff members, students, or business leaders, who bring lay and professional judgements to bear upon the actions of those who run schools, namely head teachers and middle leaders. The primary task of school governance (narrowly conceived) is to ensure that schools are publicly accountable – properly audited and monitored, high achieving, financially sustainable, law compliant, non-discriminatory and so on. In this sense school governance replaces direct steering from the centre – a federal or central government for example.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, I intend to demonstrate the value and application of a 'processual view of neoliberalisation' (ibid) to tracing the complex terrain on which school leaders and governors working in a co-operative trust accommodate and negotiate different sets of interests and demands in their practice

of school governance. This includes a focus on the problematic alignments arising from such accommodations and negotiations and the different ways these alignments work with and against some of the wider economic and political pressures sustained by the project of neoliberalism and its exigencies, namely managerial deference, technocratic efficiency, upward accountability and performativity. And second, I use these insights to draw attention to some of the tensions and dilemmas resulting from such problematic alignments as evidence of the messy actualities of co-operative school governance. These insights are used in turn to complicate some narratives which appear to construct co-operative schools as exclusively participatory, democratic organisations (Allen 2017; Audsley and Cook 2012; Davidge, Facer and Schostak 2015), although some of these narratives are presented as ideals rather than reflecting actually existing practice.

In the field of 'education governance' (broadly conceived, see Wilkins and Olmedo 2018) there are numerous interacting, complementary forces that work to position schools within a rational landscape of market determinism, key among them are league table placing, school inspections, school choice and competition more generally. Schools organise their internal operations to meet these expectations, which they do through carefully positioning themselves as unique and reputable providers in a crowded field of choice (Wilkins 2012); paying consultants to perform



'mocksteads' of their school in preparation for genuine inspections from the school's inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted); reducing teaching and student learning to measures of productivity, efficiency and outputs or 'performativity' (Ball 2003); and affirming corporate managerial framings of accountability as key mechanisms for enhancing the legitimacy of schools as publicly accountable institutions (Ranson 2010). These trends in education governance are sometimes characterised as 'neoliberal' in that they signify the subsuming of public powers and utilities within an economic logic or enterprise form that 'involves a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state' (Brown 2006, p. 693). Yet, as Jessop (2016, p. 11) observes, 'institutional orders and social relations outside the immediate logic of valorization typically have their own values and norms, bases of social inclusion or exclusion, their own forms of structured conflict, and so forth, social forces will seek to resist marketization in the name of defending the autonomy of these spheres', albeit still invoking imperatives of the market when it suits their own interests.

On this account, routines of neoliberal governance are not totalizing or deterministic, as if human action/response is simply the embodiment of the discursive accomplishments of hegemonic projects and governmental rationalities (rational consensus, perfect control and system design). Nor do instantiations of routines of

neoliberal governance (competitive self-interest or possessive individualism, managerial deference and market-ready or market-responsive behaviours) follow a logical progression making them systemic and predictable across spaces and institutions; that is, 'always and everywhere in the same homogenous and singular outcome as the sequencing is predefined' (Springer 2015, p. 7). Rather, the formal practice of policy and administration tends to be always messy, complicated work. This brings into perspective 'the complexity of interacting forces rather than assuming that governmental practice in a plurality of sites flows uniformly from the big transformations produced by neoliberalism' (Newman 2007, p. 54). As Mitchell and Lizotte (2016, p. 224) remind us, it is important to remain circumspect of the 'apparent seamlessness' with which policy is translated into the 'consciousness and practices of individuals and groups'.

From this perspective, routines of neoliberal governance cannot be analysed in isolation from the kinds of agency and 'spatio-temporal fixes' (Jessop and Sum 2016, p. 108) that shape and refract their development or non-development. The idea here is that routines of neoliberal governance require work so that their conditions and effects can be made real (or embodied). Therefore, it is important to trace empirically the everyday labour of socially situated actors engaged in processes of assembling a 'variety of neoliberalisms' (Plehwe 2009, p. 3). A key focus of this

paper therefore is to examine how routines of neoliberal governance – particularly, upward accountability, competitive advantage and efficiency – are differently appropriated, negotiated and combined as organising principles of school governance in a co-operative trust, and to draw attention to the tensions and struggle over values and norms arising from these problematic alignments within an ‘inherited institutional landscape’ (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, p. 184) such as the co-operative movement.

### **The co-operative turn**

Central to education reforms introduced by New Labour in 2000, enshrined in policy in 2005 (DfES 2005; also see 2006 Education and Inspections Act), and later adopted by the Coalition government in 2010 (Academies Act 2010), is a radical programme of education reform that allows schools to join or create their own foundations or trusts so that they may opt out of local government control. Some trusts remain within the parameters of local government control however, as evidenced by local government authorities in the North-West London borough of Camden who sought to become academy sponsors by setting up their own trusts (Neville 2016). At the time of writing, statistics released by the DfE (2018) indicate there are 7,317 open academies representing 30% of the total number of primary, secondary, special, and alternative provision schools in England. Many of these

schools operate in trusts of more than one school, sometimes called ‘sponsored academies’ or Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), equivalent to 68% or roughly two-thirds of the total number of open academies. The remaining open academies (equivalent to 1,891 schools) are ‘converter academies’ or ‘stand-alone’ schools with no formal links to other schools in the form of shared management, leadership or governance (DfE 2017).

The development of the academies programme has attracted huge controversy over the years with emerging evidence of financial scandal and mismanagement (BBC 2013), related party transactions and conflicts of interest (Boffey 2013), selective admission policies fuelling social segregation (Harris and Vasagar 2012), trust CEOs claiming inordinate salaries (Hazell 2016) and academy conversions lacking democratic consultation (Smith 2011). Moreover, a furore has erupted over escalating procurement and legal costs attached to converting local government-run schools to academies and building new free schools (Yorke 2017) despite cuts to public spending on education and mounting concerns of a ‘school funding crisis’ (Ratcliffe 2017). The rise in popularity of co-operative schools in England – numbering 850 co-operative foundation trusts and co-operative academies at the time of writing – are in part a response to this controversy, especially claims that academies are not democratically accountable since they possess powers to limit or

remove entirely the potential for wider consultation and community involvement in school governance (now largely circumscribed by the actions of a few professional, skilled folk) (Coughlan 2016; Hatcher 2006; Mansell 2013; Sleight 2013). With large numbers of academies in England now operating outside a local government democratic mandate which regards schools as 'public goods', co-operative schools set themselves apart through adopting co-operative values and principles as their value structure, namely 'mutual support through sharing good practice' and 'good governance through sound membership based structures that guarantee involvement for all the key stakeholders' (The Schools Co-operative Society 2016).

The 'hollowing out' of local government and the threat of isolationism in an increasingly competitive education landscape also means that large numbers of schools are seeking opportunities to pool their resources, jointly buy-in services and share expertise, preferably through co-operative, democratic means that sustains stakeholder models of school governance. As Davidge, Facer and Schostak (2015, p. 61) argue, 'the legal instruments, the will and the resources are available to provide a real alternative to state, private and corporate sponsorship of competition as the only approach to the organisation of the mainstream school system'.

From its early nineteenth century beginnings when socialist pioneer Robert Owen (1826) called for greater collective well-being and equality amongst his workers – in

effect seeking to 'replace the profit motive with the fruits of co-operation, and the vices of individualism with mutuality' (Thompson in Friberg, 2011, p. 118) – to its later incarnation during the 1980s when 'co-operative associations also conflicted with the neo-conservative model of individualised 'classless' consumerism and the New Right's desire to disempower organised labour' (Webster et al. 2012, p. 2), the co-operative movement has sometimes presented itself as a benevolent form of industrialism antithetical to forms of predatory capitalism that engenders asymmetric power relationships between capitalists and workers (Marx 1990). More specifically, co-operative organisations stand opposed to 'investor-led corporate capitalism' with its 'propensity to rampant and perilous financial speculation, its lack of accountability to shareholders and governments, its dubious morality and its tendency to exacerbate social and economic inequalities' (Webster et al. 2012, p. 9).

Instead the co-operative movement promotes jointly-owned, democratically-controlled, self-help enterprises run by workers in the case of worker co-operatives and consumer members in the case of consumer co-operatives, each one driven by mutual interest rather than pecuniary interest. Co-operative schools on the other hand can be classified as 'hybrid' organisations (Woodin 2015, p. 6) given they are regulated like other publicly-funded schools but have co-operative principles grafted onto them. This is most evident in the way co-operative schools appear to work

against the grain of asymmetric power relationships that typically endure within some academies where previously community-run governing bodies are being downsized or abandoned entirely to meet government demands for ‘business people’ (GOV.UK 2013) and people with the ‘right skills’ (GOV.UK 2015) who can open up the internal operation of schools to greater public scrutiny from external regulators and funders. Undercutting these trends, co-operative schools in England stand opposed to the anti-localism, anti-democratic fervour of recent government initiatives aimed at undermining stakeholder models of school governance in favour of private monopolies and corporate sponsorship led by international edu-businesses, venture philanthropists and private equity investors (Wilkins 2017). Instead, co-operative schools promote civic participation, democratic control and community resilience as key drivers of their legitimacy as publicly accountable institutions. To achieve this, co-operative schools echo the kinds of governance arrangements to be found among soft federations – sometimes called ‘collaborative trusts’ – where there is greater power-sharing supported through the creation of joint, cross-school committees with delegated powers (Salokangas and Chapman 2014).

In the specific case of co-operative trust schools, power-sharing and co-operation is notionally achieved by enabling pupils, teachers, parents, local people, employers and other member groups (universities and schools) to join the board of trustees.

The board of trustees is a separate legal entity who act as employer and finance manager for schools within the cluster, and who in turn elect some of the members of the school's governing body (the principal agents monitoring the financial and educational performance of the school) as well as elect representatives to a 'stakeholder forum' to present their views to the school leaders and governors. For many, therefore, co-operative values and organisational forms offer up opportunities to produce schools that are democratically-accountable, politically-engaged, civic organisations (Dorling 2016; Mansell 2011).

Yet co-operative schools, like all schools in receipt in public funding, are answerable to external funders and regulators (the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the school's inspectorate, Ofsted, for example) which require strong internal scrutiny and professional governance in the absence of local government oversight. Moreover, co-operative schools operate under the separate legal entity of a trust, albeit function with a degree of autonomy within that arrangement and sometimes within the admission authority of the local government. Other trust setups, notably MATs or 'hard federation' setups, are not directly accountable to local government – other than on matters of special needs and exclusions, as is required of all state-funded schools – but primarily to their trustees who in turn are accountable to central government vis-à-vis a funding agreement. This includes responsibility for



management overheads in the form of employment disputes, contractual issues and premises management as well as significant responsibilities for the financial and educational performance of the school.

A requirement for schools looking to convert to academy status is that their governing bodies demonstrate sufficient 'professionalism' (Wilkins 2016) and a sharper focus on business management theories and practices or 'corporate accountability' (Ranson 2010) to the satisfaction of external funders and regulators. This has specific and tangible consequences for the governance of all schools and the capacity of schools to resist or refuse routines of neoliberal governance. In the case of co-operative schools, recent research suggests that board of trustee membership is sometimes conditional on the appointee demonstrating relevant skills and expertise to run a school effectively: 'This calls into question the possibilities and conditions for open and voluntary membership – one of the fundamental principles of membership outlined by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)' (Davidge 2014, p. 163).

The suggestion here is that co-operative schools are always already vulnerable to capture from neoliberal appropriation – managerial deference, expert-analytic

assessment, upward accountability and cultures of performativity. At the same time, co-operative values do not serve any specific 'blueprint' or 'framework', as pointed out by former Principal and Chief Executive of the Co-operative College, Mervyn Wilson (quoted in Bradbury 2013). Co-operative schools are designed to be adapted locally for the needs of different communities, thus taking on 'highly diverse forms when they are recontextualised within the contexts of existing local cultures and priorities' (Facer, Thorpe and Shaw 2012, p. 333). At the same time, there are limits to local adaption and translation given many of the government and extra-government priorities and constraints already outlined above.

From this perspective, co-operative schools are complex assemblages as school leaders and governors continually work to assert their difference from other dominant models of 'academisation' as well as promote the co-operative brand more generally. This means paying close attention to the ways in which school leaders and governors manage any contradictions arising from their shifting positioning as promoters of the co-operative model (but simultaneously working beyond any prescribed 'co-operative practices'), guardians of local autonomy and democracy, ancillaries to a national system of inspection and high-stakes testing and (against a background of decreased public funding in education) purveyors of economisation and efficiency.

A 'processual view of neoliberalization' (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 383) is a useful framework through which to explore the various elements (specifically, the range of interests, stakes and motives) that combine to produce situated practices of school governance in a co-operative trust setting. A key focus of this section of the paper is the ways in which routines of neoliberal governance, of competition, choice and self-interest for example, are grafted onto an 'inherited institutional landscape' (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, p. 184) that values cooperation, solidarity and mutuality. To do this I draw on interview data taken from a case study of a secondary school situated in a rural area of England, hereafter referred to as Ballard's Wood (pseudonym). Ballard's Wood is engaged in extensive collaboration and shared governance with many of its neighbouring primary schools, made possible through the acquisition of a co-operative trust, hereafter referred to as United Cluster Trust (UCT). The case study material used in this paper was generated through a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) between 2012 and 2015 (Grant Reference: ES/K001299/1).

## **Translations and refusals of neoliberalism**

At the time of the research (2013) UCT was a cluster of several primary schools and one secondary school joined together through a co-operative trust with support from the school governors, teaching staff, parent constituencies, local charities, government authorities, private businesses and further education providers. The collaborative trust agreement ensured that each school within the cluster retained its own separate committee structures and full governing body (and therefore a degree of autonomy) while at the same time being committed to a vision of power-sharing and shared governance, or what UCT member schools called 'cluster governance'.

Cluster governance was achieved through the creation of cross-school committees (legal, education performance and finance) designed to stretch budget capacity, target pupil premium spending more effectively on schools that needed it most, improve pupils' transitions between schools and the continuation of targeted assistance across school phases for the most disadvantaged students and build a sense of collective security and shared responsibility. Cluster governance was particularly important for schools in the area as funding for local government has diminished significantly to accommodate the growth of the academies programme and the outsourcing of public contracts to private companies and charities. As Jerry (head teacher of Ballard's Wood and founder of UCT) commented: 'it's about trying to provide a sustainable legacy and a sustainable way of working'. The key

motivation to securing partnerships between local primary and secondary schools through the acquisition of a trust was therefore as much a pragmatic decision about improving economies of scale and allocative efficiency/equity as it was an ideological one about embracing co-operative values.

The most important thing is that we develop some kind of shared services model in order to save money. The motivation is far more about a sustainable legacy. (Jerry)

Another key motivation for the schools involved was to use UCT to overcome some of the risks and vulnerabilities of operating as a stand-alone school and resisting capture from the monopolising tendencies of some large MATs seeking to run failing schools. 'I do feel less vulnerable actually. I feel part of a bigger group', said Becky (head teacher of Whitechapel). Becky went on to say that, following the formation of UCT, competition between the UCT member schools 'eroded'. However, Becky also conceded that

Whereas before I was like oh no, no, we [referring to Whitechapel] are the best. Whereas at the end of the day we are different, we offer something

different....I mean we will always look to see how another school has done, of course you will, because, you know, you are accountable for *your* parents, and you don't want *your* parents to start thinking oh, is the school down the road doing better than us? You want *your* parents to be behind you so that you can be the very best. But certainly now I recognise that what we have here is good, what other schools have in their situation is good, because actually we currently all have good status in Ofsted's terms (emphasis added).

Echoing this, Dominic (governor at Ballard's Wood) added: 'the schools within the cluster do compete because it's the same old thing: pupils equals pounds'. On this account, the UCT member schools engaged in simultaneous collaboration and competition to achieve partial congruence of stakes and interests while still maintaining competitive advantage in their local education market. Cooperation and competition are therefore not mutually exclusive methods for school organisation but overlap and interpenetrate in productive and unpredictable ways. A processual view of neoliberalisation (Peck and Tickell 2002) is sensitive to the geo-politics that shape and inflect the development (or non-development) of the neoliberalisation of specific organisations, peoples, spaces and places. Moreover, a processual view of neoliberalisation maintains that active, dynamic space in which neoliberal projects can be seen as constituent parts of locally situated dilemmas, obligations and

normative commitments, rather than constitutive of them. This is evident in the discussion above in which competition and collaboration do not necessarily collide or conflict but converge to produce locally adapted solutions. Similarly, UCT member schools engaged in simultaneous 'upward' and 'downward' accountability to accommodate and reconcile different sets of moral obligations, contractual duties and political commitments.

We are accountable to the local authority, we are accountable to the DfE, we are accountable to Ofsted inspectors, and so on and so forth. We are accountable to whatever is out there. (Lesley, UCT governor and governor at Ballard's Wood)

UCT member schools were committed to enhancing accountability to their stakeholders – 'representative groups', 'community groups' and 'businesses' for example (Jerry) – which was interwoven with their commitment to 'high standards, or a good, high performance', including a commitment to 'making sure the budget is being spent properly, making sure you've got the right staff in the right place and so on, being aware of what's going on out there in the big educational field and how it's going to affect you' (Lesley). Upward and downward accountability therefore are not

mutually exclusive sets of goals since the moral impulse among governors and school leaders to serve their constituents is sometimes overlaid and aligned with duties and obligations that include responding to the wider economic and political pressures sustained by government, including pressures to be high performing and competitively placed to attract pupils and funding. On this account, neoliberalisation involves co-articulation and adaption (Peck and Theodore 2015) in order to accommodate and combine a 'matrix of dependencies, reciprocities and obligations' (Trnka and Trundle 2014, p. 150). As Ong (2006, p. 13) suggests,

It therefore seems appropriate to study neoliberalism not as a 'culture' or a 'structure' but as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relations.

In the spirit of transparency and cooperation, UCT was made up of 'associate members' with a view to encouraging local primary schools not yet legally incorporated into the trust to build relationships with other schools within the cluster as part of a district-wide strategic development to raising school improvement. The 'full members' within the trust were schools that converted to the status of 'grant



maintained' or 'foundation' school (legally not dissimilar to the status of academies) thus removing themselves from the control of local government and giving them powers to integrate into UCT as a separate legal authority while retaining their own autonomy to operate outside it. However, the UCT wanted to avoid the image of a 'breakaway school', like 'semi-private or anything like that' (Becky), and therefore continued to defer to the judgement of local government on admissions and employment in the interests of preserving school-government partnerships. These partnerships enabled UCT member schools to actively resist the kinds of depoliticisation entered into by schools who convert to academy status and extricate themselves from the authority of local government. Instead UCT member schools elected to maintain their political commitments to local government (as guardians of public schools) while simultaneously pursuing new configurations and forms of agency as separate legal entities operating within the trust.

In actual fact we are the admission authority. We are but we are not because we still do it through the local authority. We are the employment people but we don't because we still do it through the local authority. (Becky)

The idea is not that it's our local authority, you know, that it's the boss of us.

It's a brains trust, it's a strategic think tank, if you like, to help us solve, explore the issues that are facing you. (Jerry).

UCT trustees were made up of head teachers and one nominated governor from each school within the cluster, all of whom met regularly at 'cluster head meetings' to deliberate and vote on long-term decisions that would benefit all schools, with a focus on cross-school budget spending, targeted assistance for 'disadvantaged' pupils, succession planning, systematic attainment, continuing professional development and curriculum progression. At the same time, extensive brokering and negotiation was involved to secure certain arrangements, especially the development of new school partnerships. Cara's role as Director of Business and Community Strategy at Ballard's Wood was integral to these developments as it concerned 'brokering partnerships, supporting partnerships, understanding which partnerships and collaborations will support the school and which could become a drain'. Collaboration and cooperation was therefore conditional on the advantages accrued to the trust: 'So part of my role is to actually manage those and look for opportunities of working collaboratively that will be of advantage to the school, and to think about the sustainability of that' (Cara). UCT member schools were therefore

unwilling to commit to projects or share resources which they felt would not benefit them directly or might impede the sustainability of the UCT more generally.

None of us are going to start lobbying resources at another school to save it, because, you know, our own governors won't want that. We still want to retain our own identity and that was the important thing for us, that actually we were different schools and we didn't want to become this sort of, you know, unrecognisable United Cluster Trust. We want to be recognised as different schools within the cluster offering a different ethos and different things'

(Becky)

We've got an old, early Victorian school with many problems to the building. I mean if we were to become the owner of that site and building that is always going to be a massive drain on resources ultimately...When we looked at that, and the work involved, we said no, we weren't prepared to do it (Joseph, Chair of Governors at Close and Riley, and UCT trustee)

A processual view of neoliberalisation is useful here for analysing the 'creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation' (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012,

p. 3) through which policy discourse is translated and implemented. In the context of the inherited institutional landscape of the co-operative trust, neoliberalisation can be conceptualised as a messy hotchpotch of disparate elements in which the 'politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification' is always patterned and layered (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010, p. 184).

### **The double binds of co-operative education**

In this paper I have adopted a processual view of neoliberalisation to explore how power-sharing and cooperation is achieved in the context of a co-operative trust, with a specific focus on the instability of the relationships forged through these arrangements and 'the ways individuals act creatively for reasons of their own to create new forms of power' (Bevir 2010, p. 426). The case study of UCT above is also helpful for illustrating the fluidity and contingency of principles and practices of cooperation as some schools engage in risk assessment of the different benefits likely to be accrued through working with some schools over others. Moreover, the case study material draws attention to the blurred boundaries separating competition and collaboration and upward and downward accountability as well as the cross-cutting impulses through which they interpenetrate and overlap. Illustrated through the case study are examples of the different ways schools are both implicated in routines of neoliberal governance as well as engaged in struggles of power that

actively resist and transform those forces. The duty of co-operative schools to remain accountable to outside authorities and forces, namely the DFE, ESFA, Ofsted and the market more generally, brings into view a set of compromises and double binds that few co-operative schools seem unable to resolve or move beyond. But rather than view these compromises as power struggles that undermine a radical vision of co-operative education, it is perhaps vital to see them as symptomatic of a refusal among some schools to augment themselves purely in the image of the market.

A co-operative vision of education generates opportunities for the development of new partnerships built upon shared responsibility, mutuality and membership engagement; pedagogical processes with a focus on co-construction and student voice; and institutional formations (or relational formations to be more precise) characterised by democratic governance and civic engagement. However, everyday school practices as outlined in the case study above are still wedded to elements of self-interest, competition and upward accountability, albeit framed by school governors and leaders through a moral prerogative to serve the children and families of the local community. Local adaptations therefore make the idea of a coherent co-operative ideology seem unsustainable, even undesirable, 'given that co-operative values and principles allow for flexible interpretation' (Woodin 2015, p. 6). On this

account, co-operative schools are by their very nature bound to a set of inescapable tensions, ambivalences and uneasy alignments as they stand at the intersection of competing interests and demands, both local and national, governmental and non-governmental (also see Davidge, Facer and Schostak 2015). But to view these processes as fragile and contingent is precisely what makes them democratic and experimental.

From this perspective, we must remain circumspect of any 'synchronic', 'institutionalist' or 'structuralist' account which reduces schools either to tidy expressions of routines of neoliberal governance or to autonomous spheres for the exclusive practice of democratic co-operation and participation. Instead, it is necessary to be attentive to the multiplicity of discourses that continually shape practice and produce new combinations and alignments. A processual view of neoliberalisation is particularly useful to this task as it undermines a view of neoliberalism as omnipresent and omnipotent (Clarke 2008) and instead opens up important analytic spaces through which to view the deconstruction and reconstruction of institutions within and against these forces. These locally adapted solutions and responses reflect the 'different modes of insertion' (Clarke 2008, p. 137) through which state-regulated imperatives and market-governed logics are rearticulated to compliment pre-existing value systems and normative commitments.

Moreover, a processual view of neoliberalisation forces into perspective the blurred boundaries and intersecting positions that characterise 'neoliberal work', in effect revealing tensions and ambivalences in the way that neoliberal projects and its exigencies are struggled over in the context of local projects and politics.

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